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Sociology of Prison Life

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Abstract

Prison life both fascinates and repels. As with many aspects of punishment it attracts the interest of both academics and the general public. In this short and accessible account the principal issues of prison life are presented in a historical context that traces the emergence of focussed academic study of the way people live, and die, in prison. The most influential theoretical perspectives are clearly set out alongside a discussion of their influence on research and analysis in the UK and beyond. Questions of women's experience and that of black and minority ethnic prisoners are explored before a consideration of post-colonial prison studies is introduced. These studies of prison life beyond the axis of Europe and north America challenge some of the accumulated academic wisdom of Anglo-phone and

European studies of prison life, indicating the potential of novel developments to come in an era which, unfortunately, shows no signs of declining to produce more and more prisons.

Keywords

Prisons, institutional life, convicts, culture, coercion, power, ethnography

Body Text

The sociology of prison life, briefly defined, encompasses the systematic study of prisoner societies, of prison staff culture and/or of prisons-as-organisations. With continued and increasing uses of the prison as a criminal justice disposal, academic interest in prison life has been sustained and has grown across many countries across the globe. Contemporary studies of prison life form a diverse body of work that variously examine the prison world through concepts of space, place, architecture, gender, ethnicity, law, political economy and national and global governance. Contemporary developments within the sociology of prison life, however, continue to build upon and extend a knowledge base that has developed cumulatively since 1940 and the first academic sociological study of prison life.

Foundations

In *The Prison Community* (1940) Donald Clemmer presented the first sociological study of prison life. Based on his research in the Menard Branch of the Illinois State Penitentiary, Clemmer put forward and established the notion of 'prisonisation'. This concept can be understood as the impact of the prison experience on prisoners and is thus a descriptor of the process by which those who enter prison take on the 'folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary' (1940: 299). Clemmer argued that prisonisation may occur to greater or lesser degrees depending on a range of factors (length of sentence, level of association with peer groups within prison, strength of ties outside prison, *inter alia*). Some of the factors associated with the process result from the peculiarities and constraints of the prison environment, including the acceptance (or resistance to) the powerless position of being a prisoner and the conditions under which prisoners must eat, dress, work, sleep and so forth. However, Clemmer suggested that relational factors also influenced the process. Chief amongst them was the extent to which a prisoner integrated into a primary group amongst the prisoner community. Belonging to a primary group required adherence to an 'inmate code' or system of norms that demanded loyalty to the prisoner group and opposition to staff. The result of the process, according to Clemmer, was a (further) rejection of societal norms and a continued or deepened commitment to a value system outside the laws and conventions of mainstream society. Clemmer's findings and theories about prison life and prisoner experience dominated academic understandings and thinking about the prison for over 20 years and, to some extent, his ideas remain influential today.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s further studies of the prison began to emerge. Three further early sociological studies of the prison are worthy of note. In 1958, Gresham Sykes published *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*, based on research in the New Jersey State prison. In this work and in Sykes and Messinger (1960), aspects of the 'inmate code' and its influence on prison social life and prisoner experience are examined. Sykes and Messinger argued that Clemmer's theory of prisonisation was incomplete because it did not explain how or why prisoner culture formed in the first place. Sykes argued that the prison environment exerted pressures or 'pains' that altered the relational parameters between prisoners. Thus, prisoners needed to adapt to various demands of the environment and their fellow inmates in order to endure the ordeal of prison life. The pains of imprisonment, argued Sykes, included several deprivations: liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. These deprivations, in turn, exercised a destabilising influence that could result in competing prisoner hierarchies, clandestine activities and illegal markets and a variety of other informal structures and *sub rosa* codes of conduct.

Around the same time as Sykes' study of the prisoner society, another, alternative consideration of the experience of institutional confinement was put forward. Drawing on a participant-observation study of a mental hospital in Washington, DC., Chicago School sociologist, Erving Goffman published *Asylums* in 1961. Goffman coined the term 'total institution', which he defined as institutions that have an 'encompassing or total character, [as] symbolised by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside...that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire...The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating [the] three spheres of life [sleep, play and work]' (1961: 16-18). Goffman utilised a symbolic interactionist (or interpretivist) approach to consider the experience of confinement and argued that through the inherently artificial and degrading environment of the total institution, inmates experience a 'mortification of the self'. Their previous identities become disrupted or jettisoned and new institutional identities take shape. However, these new identities form in response to and are peculiar to the particular institution in which the inmate is confined. The struggle to cope with and maintain a sense of identity in the face of staff and institutional pressures to erode the prisoner's sense of self were identified by Goffman as the main interactional dynamics that characterise total institutions.

In 1962, John Irwin and Donald Cressey published an important theoretical article entitled: *Thieves, Convicts and the Inmate Culture*. In this paper, they argued that too much emphasis had been placed on the influence of the prison environment on the development of inmate culture and that not enough attention had been focused on the external cultural influences and behavioural patterns of prisoners. Irwin and Cressey argued that that prisoners 'imported' certain subcultural values, beliefs and conventions into the prison world that had held meaning for them on the outside. Irwin and Cressey's paper was the first to consider the social roles that prisoners occupied prior to their imprisonment and the extent to which this 'latent culture' influenced in-prison culture. They suggested that the prisoner community corresponded directly with current and changing societal trends and that prisoner societies were more chaotic, diverse and less rule-bound than previous studies had suggested.

Dominant Theoretical Models

The main theoretical models on prison social life that have dominated and, to some extent, continue to feature in the research literature have their origins in the above mentioned foundational studies. Thus, theories on the sociology of prison life tend to be based on either a functionalist model, an 'importation' model or some integrated version of these two broad approaches.

Functionalist models take a problem-solving view to account for prisoner culture. From a functionalist perspective, it is thought that prisoner culture develops as it does *in response or as an adaptation* to the frustrations and deprivations of imprisonment. The purest branch of the functionalist model argues that any differences in the organisation of prison establishments are irrelevant because the experience of total institutions is so coercive that it homogenises prisoner responses to their environment (see Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961). By contrast, a situational-functionalist model argues that prisoners' responses to prison life are situationally contingent on institutional characteristics (Grusky, 1959; Wilson, 1968). Broadly speaking, functionalist perspectives are known in the prisons literature as 'deprivation' models because they seek to explain prison life and prisoners' adaptations to it as responses to the pains of imprisonment and the deprivations associated with the loss of liberty.

In response and in contrast to functionalist perspectives, explanations which favour an importation model argue for the importance of pre-prison social roles in shaping prisoner culture. Importation models are underpinned by a 'negative selection' view of the prisoner group. That is, involvement in criminal activity is the one common variable amongst prisoners, which is indicative of varying degrees of opposition to conventional norms. Thus, the social environment of prison life is shaped not only by the constraints of the prison environment, but also by the imported value systems, customs and the various subcultures to which prisoners belong prior to their entry into prison.

Further studies of prison life have proposed slight deviations from these models. For example, Jacobs (1977), Dilulio (1987) and Useem and Kimball (1989) identified the importance of administrative approaches, organisation and control on influencing the prisoner society. However, much contemporary prisons literature tends to present integrated versions of prison social life which draw on aspects of both importation and deprivation models (Tittle, 1972; Liebling and Arnold, 2004; Crewe, 2010).

Mainstream Studies of Prisons and Prison Life in the UK

Subsequent to the above foundational studies, a number of in-depth examinations of the prison have been undertaken in a variety of penal setting, many emerging from within the UK (for example, *inter alia* Morris and Morris, 1963; King and Elliot, 1977; Carlen, 1983; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay, 1995; Liebling and Arnold, 2004; Crewe, 2010). The first sociological study of prison life in Britain was conducted by Terence and Pauline Morris in Pentonville prison in 1963. Their research

provided a great deal of descriptive, ethnographic detail about Pentonville and drew comparisons to the work of Clemmer and Sykes. However, amongst prison administrators the work was received as a polemical reading of the prison and was thus viewed as a somewhat controversial contribution to the prisons literature.

Since the 1960s, a steady stream of sociological commentary, research and scholarship on prisons in the UK has emerged from the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. Initially, the relationship between the Institute of Criminology and prison administrators was forged by the first director of the Institute, Sir Leon Radzinowicz. Radzinowicz acted as a frequent advisor to senior civil servants and prison administrators and also sat on the Advisory Council on the Penal System (1966-1978). Through this Council, Radzinowicz advised on a number of matters associated with penal and prison policy, including chairing the committee which set up the system of maximum-security prisons in England and Wales (known as the 'dispersal' prison system, see Radzinowicz, 1998).

The Institute of Criminology has continued to work closely with prisons administrators in the UK and elsewhere, specialising in sociological studies of the prison. In 1996, Richard Sparks, Anthony Bottoms and Will Hay published *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. This book, based on ethnographic research in two maximum-security prisons (Albany and Long Lartin) in the late 1980s, considered the factors which influenced the orderliness (or otherwise) of a prison regime. Sparks et al. argued for the importance of legitimacy in the administration of prisons. Although a significant sociological study of prison order and administration, this work is better described as an examination of prisons-as-organisations, rather than a study of prison life per se. Thus it might be differentiated from other works in prison sociology, which focused more directly on prisoner societies and social roles.

In 2000 the Prisons Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge was established under the directorship of Professor Alison Liebling. Liebling has established a formidable reputation as an authority on prison quality of life, having conducted several large studies on various aspects of prison life, including: prisoner suicide, self-harm and safer custody (1992; Liebling et al., 2005), staff-prisoner relations (2011), the 'moral performance of prisons' (Liebling and Arnold, 2004), *inter alia*. Liebling's work on 'what matters' in prisons has been influential in shaping the way prison administrators measure and conceptualise prison quality. Liebling's concept of 'moral performance' draws administrative attention to several aspects of humane custody, such as: respect, trust, safety, dignity and well-being. In addition to Liebling's own work, a steady stream of researchers and doctoral students working at the Prisons Research Centre have produced numerous sociological and psycho-social studies of prison life, of prisons-as-organisations and of prison administration (e.g. Bosworth, 1999; Crewe, 2010; Drake, 2012).

Consideration of Differing Perspectives

One of the main difficulties faced by sociological prison researchers and theorists concerned with examining the inner life of prisons has been untangling the complex relationships which influence it. As with society in general, there is an extreme complexity of attitudes, opinions, beliefs and values of any given prison population. Although many studies of the prison have ignored the

diversity of prisoner experiences and the heterogeneity of prisoners' viewpoints on their own lives and their reflections on the experience of imprisonment, there have been some valuable contributions that have applied interpretive sociological theory to ethnographic or interview data. These works have illustrated the connections between human agency, intersubjective meanings and environmental or structural conditions of prison life (see Goffman, 1961; Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Bosworth, 1999; Jones and Schmid, 2000; Rowe, 2011). There are, however, a range of structural positions or standpoints from which prison life might be considered, including: the perspective of women prisoners, LGBT prisoners, Black and Minority Ethnic prisoners or civilian versus discipline prison staff.

Sociology of Prison Life in Women's Prisons

Like many areas of sociology, understandings of the human experience of prison life were initially androcentric, i.e. established from the standpoint of men's experiences. Though there are some very early examinations of women's imprisonment from a sociological perspective (see for example Selling, 1931), the first large-scale studies of women's imprisonment were conducted in the mid-1960s by David Ward and Gene Kassebaum (1965) in California and Rose Giallombardo (1966) in West Virginia (but see also Heffernan, 1972). These early studies did not fully examine women's prisons or women's experiences of imprisonment as separate areas of inquiry from men's prisons. Instead, the findings from studies of prisoner societies made up of women were compared and contrasted with previous findings from studies of men in prison. Ward and Kassebaum, for example, commented on how women's experiences of imprisonment differed noticeably from men's, that there was not a strong 'inmate code' amongst women. They argued that women prisoners tended to form 'families' or 'cliques' through which contraband might be distributed and shared, rather than the entrepreneurial, black market that characterised men's imprisonment. These early researchers argued that women's gender roles were imported into the prison with them, while the deprivations and context of institutional life shaped and dictated the way these roles were fulfilled. As Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner (2003: 22) have noted 'Important sources of variation in adjustment – institutional characteristics and characteristics of the prisoner population – were left largely unexplored.'

A great deal of the sociology of women's imprisonment has focused on women's intimate relationships in prison (Norris, 1974; Propper, 1982; Owen, 1998). However, more recent developments in the sociological literature on prison life in women's prisons has moved on to consider a range of other aspects of women's imprisonment, including: the way women are constituted in penal discourse and are subjected to a gendered form of control (Carlen, 1983); how experiences of imprisonment are shaped by characteristics of the institution (Rock, 1996); the influence of macro-sociological and political factors on women's experiences of imprisonment (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2005); and the way women construct identities, engage in resistance and negotiate power in prison (Bosworth, 1999; Rowe, 2011).

Convict Criminology

Much insight has been gained into prison experiences from 'insider' perspectives, including autobiographical and fictionalised accounts from authors with experience of incarceration (e.g. Serge, 1930; Davis, 1971). In particular, the work of 'convict criminologists' (those who have

experienced prison life first hand, as prisoners, and who now have academic careers) has provided the sociology of prison life with vivid and reflective accounts of prison life and studying prison that could not have been provided from a conventional perspective. Convict Criminology is a branch of critical criminology started in the late 1990s by academics in the USA who were prisoners, ex-prisoners or ex-prison staff. It is concerned with challenging existing definitions of crime, the over-use of prison as a penal sanction, and exposing the shortcomings of the criminal justice system. Convict Criminology emerged in the USA as a response to the continued failure of mainstream criminologists and criminal justice practitioners to appreciate the perspective of the convict. This failure, according to convict criminology, is evidenced in the persistent representation of prisoners and ex-prisoners as distinctive, 'inferior' types of human being. These perceptions foster a damaging indifference toward a proliferating and self-sustaining criminal justice industry that is both inhumane and unnecessary (see in the USA, Irwin, 1970; Jones et al 2009, in the UK Aresti 2012; Earle 2011).

Black and Minority Ethnic Prisoners

That prisons tend to gather the kinds of people that Loic Wacquant (2001) describes as 'the wretched of the city' is no particular revelation to anyone with even the most passing familiarity with who gets sent to prison. However, any visitor to a US or British prison will be quickly confronted by visual evidence that this is a dark skinned population. Much more than in the general population, prisoners tend to be drawn from black and minority ethnic groups. White people are still a majority in these country's prisons, but their chances of being incarcerated are far less than their black or minority ethnic counterparts. In the USA analysts such as Angela Davis (2003) and Michelle Alexander (2010) identify the continuities of American racism that translate from the days of slavery, the plantation system, through the legal machinations 'Jim Crow' to the current 'prison-industrial' complex.

Loic Wacquant (2001) recognises the interplay of race and class dynamics in the declining American cityscapes as generating 'a deadly symbiosis' in which black ghettos feed the prisons, who in turn recycle their damaged black populations back into the decrepit housing and grinding poverty that produced them in the first place. Controversially, Wacquant describes this relationship as entirely functional to a largely white neo-liberal political class as it serves to separate and distinguish a black 'underclass', reproducing white anxiety and simultaneously offering containment of its racialised threat.

Few other white commentators provide such an urgent or powerful analysis of the racial configurations of the US penal nightmare. His analysis is rich in detail, broad in sweep and grand in gesture. However critics (Newburn 2010) find a tendency to erase differences and variation within the US carceral complex that do not align so closely with the racialised dynamics he identifies.

The variable and shifting dynamics of race, the state and prison on the opposite side of the Atlantic are examined in a detailed British empirical study (Phillips 2012). Coretta Phillips' study is invaluable in analysing the specific configurations of 'the multicultural prison'. Phillips finds 'enduring trialities' in the combination of race, class and gender that provide the two prisons she studied with a diverse population. Attending to the detailed stories gathered through sustained ethnographic immersion, she provides a nuanced account that engages as fully with the 'pains of racism' as it does with the pains of incarceration. In place of simplistic dyads of race, Phillips (2012:203) presents 'the contorted inflections of racism'. Amid the continuing evidence of systemic, institutionalised racism that selects and sieves the black and minority ethnic population through

every stage of criminal justice procedure from arrest through to incarceration, Phillips also identifies changing patterns of resistance, reconciliation, resentment and racialization. The multicultural prison reflects multicultural realities in being both convivial and conflicted.

The global diversity of prison has distinctive patterns of racialization but the sheer scale and longevity of the disproportionality in US and British prison systems demand focussed attention. Determining the precise mechanisms that produce such features of prison populations is a complex task and neglecting to do so seems to be implicated in their endurance.

Prison Studies Grounded in Sociological Critique

Considerations of prison life which have focused heavily on either administrative concerns or the factors that account for differing prisoner societies have tended to avoid questions associated with the broader social meaning of imprisonment as a form of punishment or the extent to which prisoner experiences serve the assumed purposes of imprisonment. However, there is much sociological and critical criminological literature that problematises the use, operation and proliferation of prisons. In 1972, Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor published *Psychological Survival: The Experience of Long Term Imprisonment*. This book considers the lived experience of a maximum-security wing of a prison in the North of England. It exposes the personal and psychological struggles of prisoners attempting to cope with isolation, heavy control measures and long-term prison sentences. The book is one of the first to offer an account of prison life from the standpoint of prisoners. Cohen and Taylor achieved a degree of authenticity that had eluded previous prison researchers by developing their ideas for the book in collaboration with the prisoners who they met through a teaching-based relationship, rather than during a formalised research project per se. The book continues to influence critical prison scholars due to its poignancy in capturing and analysing aspects of the experience of long-term imprisonment.

A number of critical studies and writings about prison life have aimed to draw attention to the chronic failure of prisons or to question the extent to which experiences of imprisonment fulfil the supposed or official purposes of prisons as a social institution. For example, British prisons in the 1970s and 1980s were troubled by prisoner riots and disturbances, thus critical scholars were particularly concerned by these problems. In 1991, Phil Scruton, Joe Sim and Paula Skidmore, published *Prisons Under Protest* (1991), which examined the problem of prison protests through the study of Peterhead prison in Scotland. The book argued, unequivocally, that any appearance of order in prisons was purely the result of enforced compliance or coercion and that: "Life in most British prisons is an unrelenting imposition of authority" (1991: 62). Moreover, one of the most influential critical studies of the prison is found in Thomas Mathiesen's *Prison on Trial: A Critical Assessment* (1990). In this volume, Mathiesen systematically outlines the many ways in which prisons fail to fulfil their supposed purposes (e.g. deterrence, preventing re-offending, etc). He declares the prison a fiasco, but exposes some of the underlying structural and political economic forces that perpetuate its use.

Similarly, radical sociological writing and activism against the use of the prison has a long history in the US. Angela Y. Davis has perhaps been the most vocal opponent of the use of the prison in the US and the expansion of the 'prison industrial complex'. The prison industrial complex

is a term, grounded in political economic analysis of the prison system and represents the idea that the expansion of the prison population is attributable to the political and economic influence of both private prison companies and the various ancillary agencies and corporations that supply goods and services to maintain the prison system. Davis has thus drawn academic and public attention to some of the structural social factors that influence the use of the prison (and, in turn, prison life), including the problem of the disproportionate use of imprisonment for people of colour.

Prison Life beyond the North

We have seen that the dominant theoretical models in the sociology of prisons life literature were developed mostly in the light of situated practices in just two countries, the United States and the United Kingdom. With the expansion of the use of the prison around the world, however, historical, ethnographic and first-hand examinations of prison life outside of Anglo and Northern societies have recently begun to emerge, much in the English language (see, inter alia, Aguirre, 2005; Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Dikötter and Brown, eds., 2007; Piacentini, 2004; Focaal, 2014; Miller and Campbell, eds., 2014; Prison Service Journal, 2014; Salvatore and Aguirre, eds., 1996). An essential starting point for this literature is that Southern prisons are poorly resourced in comparison to the prisons of Western Europe and North America. Important for current purposes, Southern prisons are not only more overcrowded and austere than prisons in the United States and United Kingdom, for example, but they are often characterised by acute staff shortages. In Brazil, for instance, it is quite normal to find just one guard on duty per 100, even 200 inmates (Darke, 2013). Under these conditions, officers depend on inmates to collaborate in the administration of everyday prison routines, for instance working as office clerks, medical auxiliaries, cleaners, cooks and porters, and on inmates' families and voluntary sector groups to provide essential goods and services such as food, toiletries, medicines and doctors. Equally significant, in many countries prison officers only enter the wings to lock and unlock cells. As a result, Southern prisoners are largely left to their own devices, not only to organise everyday routines on the wings, but also to maintain discipline (Darke and Karam, 2015; Garces et al., 2013).

This recent vibrancy in academic engagement with prisons in the post-colonial world raises significant questions over the extent to which the dominant theoretical models in the sociology of prison life literature (regarding prisonisation, mortification, latent culture and prisons as organisations) that we outlined earlier in this chapter are applicable beyond the global North. For instance, despite the obvious material deprivations and inability of officers to provide security, researchers have noted that Southern prisons are not necessarily as disorderly or inmate hierarchies as competing and predatory as our theories might predict. To make sense of this apparent contradiction, studies of Southern prison have focused on the ways in which prison staff and inmates may respond to the inhumane conditions in which they find themselves living and working through negotiation rather than conflict. Mahuya Bandyopadhyay (2010) explains that bad prison conditions give rise to social bonds as well as social tensions. When deprivation becomes a shared experience, as it is in prisons across the global South, it appears that humans have a natural capacity for solidarity and mutual aid.

Finally, and closely related, the impoverished nature of post-colonial prisons leads to a need to reconsider the universal applicability of Goffman's (1961) concept of the total institution. The first point that needs to be made here is that the barriers between prisons and communities are generally more permeable than in the West. For instance, prisoners typically have greater contact with their families, who we have noted, are often relied upon to make up for short-falls in state provision. Further, with the growing phenomena of gang culture in the guardless prison wings and the likewise inadequately policed ghettos of Latin America and other parts of the developing world (Hinton and Newburn, eds., 2009), prison and community life are becoming increasingly linked. For instance, in large parts of Brazil, prisoners are allocated to particular prisons and prison wings according to the gang in control of the area that they come from. Involvement in gang activity itself is not a requirement. On the outside, gangs provide material support such as food parcels to prisoners' families. Gang leaders arriving in prison are likely to be fast-tracked as inmate leaders; imprisoned gang leaders are likely to return to positions of authority in the community upon release.

The work of prison researchers beyond the West casts new light on the sociology of imprisonment. The enduring thematic issues associated with prison life, such as order, security, control, and staff-prisoner relationships take on a different character, offering new insights when examined in differing cultural, social and political contexts. Christie (2004) has argued that prisons expose key aspects of the machinery of the states that they represent. Thus, by considering prisons from different social and political contexts alongside one another there is much understanding to be gained both about practices of imprisonment and the constitution of state powers. As the use of the prison continues to proliferate around the world, findings and observations from sociological prison studies from all corners of the globe will form a vital part of the continuing development of our understanding of the sociology of prison life.

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